

Building in the Anthropocene

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The photographs accompanying this article were taken in and around the Weston Building, designed by Feilden Fowles, at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in February 2019.

In recent decades, proposals have been made by natural and social scientists to classify our current geological epoch as the Anthropocene – the period in which human activity is the major influence on the earth’s depleted ecosystems. While the classification is still awaiting verification from the International Commission on Stratigraphy, it already has considerable cachet, with theorist Donna Haraway describing it as

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“not-yet-official but increasingly indispensable” and near “mandatory” in the humanities, arts and science.

So how do we address the impact our existence is having on the earth and climate change? In the last few decades, artists, writers and scientists have been grappling with this question, but what ought architecture’s response to be? The work of American artist Robert Smithson (1938-73), a practitioner best known for his land art or “earthworks”, could offer one route into the issue.

In 1969, Smithson created *Asphalt Rundown*, an artwork that even today offers a powerful indicator of how we might expand our architectural thinking. Captured in a documentary video, *Asphalt Rundown* sees a dump-truck arrive at a disused open quarry on the outskirts of Rome and begin to pour asphalt, a material with its origins in oil and carbon, down one of the slopes. As the asphalt spreads, it fills the crevices from which other materials have long since been extracted. Showing an artificial layer of material poured over the already disrupted earth, the work brings together erosion, gravity and the physical properties of landscape and industrial materials to create a highly designed space, the meaning of which is embedded in the multiple time frames that created it.

Smithson made a clear connection between industrialised materials and their geological make-up,

a theme he also took up in a body of writing that critically engages with the American southwestern desert and the decaying infrastructure of post-industrial urban areas. These texts sought to situate our understanding of the earth’s structure within prehistoric “deep-time”, with Smithson using his 1968 essay ‘A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects’ to coin the term “abstract geology” to describe his earthworks. “In order to read the rocks we must become conscious of geologic time and of the layers of prehistoric material that is embedded in the Earth’s crust,” he wrote. “When one scans the ruined sites of pre-history one sees a heap of wrecked maps that upsets our present art historical limits.”

If the Anthropocene is defined in terms of how human activity is scored into the stratigraphic layers of the earth, Smithson’s methods and works are as relevant today as they were at the time of their execution. With this in mind, one recent piece of architecture may act as a modest marker for a turn in the discipline and prompt a reconsideration of architecture’s impact on its surrounding environment. The Yorkshire Sculpture Park’s (YSP) Weston building in the north of England is a new visitor centre and gallery designed by the London-based architects Feilden Fowles. The Weston, which opens in spring 2019, is the latest in a series of exhibition spaces created since the YSP opened in 1977, including the 2002 visitors’ centre designed by Feilden Clegg Bradley and the Longside Gallery, a cattle shed remodelled by Tony Fretton in 2001.

Feilden Fowles’s Weston sits on the site of a disused quarry, which provided the stone used in an ornamental dam that is part of the park’s original 18th-century landscaping. The quarry has long been grassed over. Nevertheless, the site inspired the architects Edmund Fowles and Fergus Feilden to take its “geological story” as a starting point for their design and “to look at the geology of the site and the strata”. The remains of the quarry are evident in the marked dip in the contours of the land upon which the building sits, with the gallery embedded within banked earth formed from the remains of the spoil. Wrapping around it, meanwhile, are 1.5m-thick walls made from rammed concrete, formed by a method of pouring through which the concrete is built up and allowed to dry layer by layer, creating an appearance of stratification. The architects researched the bedrock of the site, sourcing local aggregates from gravel pits, as well as limestone chippings and crushed pink granite to create the walls,

which were then cast with varying retardants to arrest the setting times. Pulverised fly ash, a by-product of the iron smelting process, was also used to lessen the percentage of cement in the mixture and therefore reduce carbon emissions. As a result, passing through the walls creates the impression of being drawn through a rent in the earth, an effect made more pronounced by the layering of the concrete that was designed, in Fowles’s words, “to form the appearance of sedimentary rock”.

The concept for the Weston was informed by the work of Smithson as well as that of his contemporary, the American artist Michael Heizer. In particular, Heizer’s use of negative space was influential, as seen in the artist’s Double Negative earthwork: two trenches that were cut into the Mormon Mesa, northwest of Overton, Nevada, in 1969-70. “The potential of this rich seam of work to influence and challenge the approaches of architects was clear,” says Fowles. “It must have been very powerful for the architects of the time.” Indeed, in a discussion between Heizer, Smithson and fellow practitioner Dennis Oppenheim, published in Smithson’s *Collected Writings*, the artists talk of their interest in the “indoor-outdoor dialectic”, with Heizer acknowledging that his fascination with the outside was driven by the opportunity to create on a scale limited by the indoors: “I work outside because it’s the only place where I can displace mass.”

Feilden Fowles’s structure is similarly interested in this flow between interior and exterior. “We wanted the

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building to have an ambiguity between sculpture and architecture,” explains Fowles. “We contemplated a building hewn from the sedimentary rock and the strata beneath, and we were trying to allow the existing topography to determine a tectonic and material

experience over a more traditional figure-ground relationship, where a functioning plan is conceived and set down on the ground.” The soft curve of the southwest-facing walls, for example, see the building’s material palette move from rammed concrete to timber and glass, with the placement of the glazed facade intended to create a proscenium from which to view the YSP. In this way, Feilden Fowles foster a more picturesque relationship with the exterior. Indeed, the architects talk of a two-way conversation between the building and the landscape. “We had the opportunity to move away from the ‘white box’ gallery experience and instead have a connection to the outdoors, and with the sculpture in the park,” explains Fowles.

These two opposing building techniques – the rammed concrete as an extension of the landscape, contrasted against the timber pavilion structure with its glazed walls – set up a temporal relation for the site. “We envisaged its existence long outlasting the building’s useful life, like the remnants of a dry-stone wall,” says Fowles of the decision to work with rammed concrete, which will weather at an altogether different rate to the timber structure. To my mind, this approach finds its echo in the fascination with the entanglement of the earth and time evident in Smithson’s work. “The strata of the earth is a jumbled museum,” he wrote in ‘A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects’. “Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade rational order, and social structures.”

Within Smithson’s “jumbled museum” a kind of parity is achieved – every disruption to the landscape, be it climactic or human in origin, is a signifier of activity. Feilden Fowles, albeit less directly, also use a narrative of disrupting the site – their building is an intervention punctuating what Smithson would have termed the “distant extremes of time” that it embodies. Smithson’s work involved extreme contrasts between different time periods, and the Weston, although modest in standing, uses a similar typology of rearranging and shifting earth to reveal the process of making as a response to the site. Within its design is an acknowledgment of the need to value the geological and the different time scales it contains. By situating our behaviour within this deeper analysis of time, a degree of humility in how we build in relation to this epoch has the possibility to emerge. **E N D**









